

Interview with Carolyn Cosby Dorsey

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

CAROLYN COSBY DORSEY

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

Initial interview date: January 22, 1992

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on Wednesday, January 22, 1992. I am interviewing Carolyn Dorsey at her home on Cathedral Avenue in Washington, DC.

You were married in 1940, in Brookline, Massachusetts. Now, why in Brookline?

DORSEY: That's where I lived. I was born there, went to school there, made my debut there, and was married there.

Q: Very good reasons to be married there! You came to Washington two years later or immediately?

DORSEY: No, we were in Boston, in an apartment on Beacon Street, and lived there for about a year and a half. We came here in 1942. My husband went to Dartmouth, graduated cum laude, and Dr. Hopkins, president of Dartmouth, wanted Steve to come down as sort of his protégé. After graduation from Dartmouth he'd gone to Harvard Business School and had his MBA there. Then he worked at First Boston Corporation for year and a half, for the large sum of \$25 a week — can you imagine those days how we lived?

I was working at Best & Company in Brookline. We had a darling one-bedroom apartment. There were only three rooms, awfully pretty, on the Charles River but we had a maid who

Library of Congress

came every day at four o'clock and got dinner for us. I had the car because I had to go out to Brookline to Best's and Steve came back from a downtown office.

Then Dr. Hopkins brought Steve down to Washington as his protégé and he worked for the War Production Board for a while. Then I think Steve spent some time or other on the Italian desk. He died 25 years ago, so it's hard to remember, but he was only there for a while. Then he worked for UNESCO. When Wristonization came in we discussed it, and I said, "What better opportunity to have to see the world and be paid for it, too, and I think it would be great if you went into it."

Q: So you had not lived abroad before?

DORSEY: I'd been abroad before but never lived there.

Q: I guess I'm interested in your discussion about the Wriston possibility.

DORSEY: Steve agreed that it was a wonderful way to see the world and he had not been overseas. Then he became a sort of Middle East specialist and took all these trips. He went to Bahrain, to Dhahran, to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, all these Middle East countries.

Q: And you didn't accompany him?

DORSEY: No, these were special trips.

Q: Your daughters were born...

DORSEY: My oldest daughter Carolyn was born in 1943 and Charlotte in 1947. They were young, about eight and 11, when we went overseas. Lyn had studied French — I'm trying to recall how she got to be in a French school — anyway, Charlotte went to the American Community School in Beirut and Lyn went to a French school where they spoke only French; she was taught by an Alsatian woman.

Library of Congress

About 1964 when we were in Italy and Steve was Consul General, Charlotte and Lyn attended school in Switzerland. Lyn was in Neuchatel; for three years Charlotte was in Lausanne, I forget the name of the school, it's very well-known. When we were transferred from Beirut to Khartoum there was no school for her age group there, so she went to Madiera School for two years.

Q: To back up a few years, when your husband decided to go into the State Department in the Wriston program, you had been in Washington for quite some time, was that a big family adjustment?

DORSEY: No, not really, because I had a lot of family here anyway. All except my father were Navy people. A grandfather who was an Admiral and a grandmother lived on Massachusetts Avenue across from the Sulgrave Club. My mother's brother was a Captain and lived on Roland Place here. My father's brother, a Cosby, was a Colonel in the Army and had been a military aide to Presidents Taft and Wilson. He was Engineer Commissioner in those days when Washington was governed by three Commissioners.

As a matter of fact, Uncle Spencer was the one who had all the cherry trees planted in Washington. Mrs. Taft was very interested in this project, so the Japanese government sent 3,000 cherry trees. They were all diseased except for about 15. It was of course terribly embarrassing, but my uncle had to write to them and say "sorry, but these trees are diseased." The Japanese were mortified; they sent 3,000 more, which were planted all around the Tidal Basin.

Q: I think you have quite a Washington history. So I guess my question is, was it difficult to leave all this and go to Beirut?

DORSEY: Well, I thought it was rather exciting. We had a wonderful maid that we took with us, she was with us for 33 years. She came to me when Lyn was six months old. I'll never forget Steve calling and saying, "Wilhelmina, I want to talk to you" — her name

Library of Congress

was Wilhelmina Bolling — and he told her, “You know, we're going a long ways off, to the Middle East, a place called Beirut, Lebanon, very far away. But we'd love to have you come.” She was a marvelous cook as well as a housekeeper, babysitter and everything else. He said, “The government does not pay your fare, so I will have to pay it. If you come, you'd stay for six months, and then if you didn't like it I'll send you home. What do you think about that?”

She sai[imitating strong southern black accent]“Well, Mistuh Doahsey, you know we cullud folk uh po' folk and we cayunt affohd tuh travel. But if you would lak to take me, ah shuah would love to go.” [Well, Mr. Dorsey, you know we colored folk are poor folk and we cannot afford to travel. But if you would like to take me, I sure would love to go.]

Q: Oh, how nice! Well, it sounds as though your whole family including Wilhelmina were all ready for this — did you have any sort of orientation at the State Department before you went?

DORSEY: Oh yes, because Steve was working in the State Department, not in the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you go to the Foreign Service Institute [FSI] and have any orientation?

DORSEY: Yes, we did. But I don't think we had it at the time we were assigned to Beirut, because enough English was spoken in Beirut so that it wasn't necessary to take a course in French. But when we went to Italy we did attend the FSI.

Q: I notice that you were evacuated ... would that have been from Khartoum?

DORSEY: No. In 1958 I think it was we were evacuated from Beirut to Rome.

Q: You have noted “terrorism, communal rioting, evacuation and separation.”

Library of Congress

DORSEY: The children and I and Wilhelmina went to Rome. Steve had to stay in Beirut of course. He was then on loan to AID, the Agency for International Development, as Country Director. So the only person he had to report to was the Ambassador, Donald Heath. The next Ambassador was Rob McClintock.

Q: What was the disturbance that caused you evacuation?

DORSEY: That was when Eisenhower was President and the Lebanese asked for help but it was just a show of strength, just to be ready with the Sixth Fleet, but our building was bombed because President Chamoun's son, his wife and little baby lived on the top floor, and the Arabs — Shiites or whichever ones they were I don't remember — were trying to kill him. One evening we were on the porch along one side of a triangle of three buildings around an empty lot. They started lobbing, then shooting across the top of our building. We spent three hours in the hallway where there were no windows until the bombardment stopped. It was right after that we were evacuated.

Q: All the Embassy and AID wives?

DORSEY: They said better get out, yes, so most of us did. Anne Boardman and her husband lived in our building but they had already left for the summer. I think this happened in July. Anyway, we had home leave coming up in two months and Steve was scared to death. By then Rob McClintock was Ambassador, Heath had gone I believe to Saudi Arabia. We were afraid that McClintock was going to send us home, because we'd rented our house and wouldn't have had a place to live, it would have been expensive. But he evacuated us to Rome and we were there for about two months.

We were in a small pensione and I didn't need Wilhelmina, our maid, because there was nothing for her to do there, so I sent her home. She had family in Virginia. We arrived home after two months and she was already in the house to greet us because our lessee didn't like it and had left.

Library of Congress

Q: But how fortunate you were to have her with you throughout all those years. I think one of the trials of the Foreign Service, really, is having a nice domestic staff and then having to leave it and start all over again. Was she always the only person you had, or did you hire local people to do heavy work?

DORSEY: Oh yes, but she was always with us except when we went to Khartoum where they wouldn't accept her because she was black and a woman. There were male servants, the saffragi[sp?], and women were recognized only as nursemaids. I didn't need a nursemaid, so Wilhelmina went home.

Q: So, what did she do while you were in Khartoum?

DORSEY: We rented our house to Chester Bowles. He was "our" first Secretary of State. Mrs. Bowles said, "I'll only rent it if I can have Wilhelmina," so she worked for the Bowles while we were in Khartoum. Then they bought a house in Georgetown and tried their best to take her away from us but she wouldn't go.

We'd expected to be in Beirut only two years but we were there for three. Steve had had a second opportunity to attend the War College and an official in AID wouldn't release him, saying "we need you here." This was upsetting to Steve, who was trying to phase out AID in Beirut, where it wasn't needed, but they wouldn't let him. Then we had a direct transfer to Khartoum where Steve was Deputy Chief of Mission.

Q: I must say, you seem to have taken all this in stride. And the girls too?

DORSEY: Well, they had a lot of fun. Everybody was so nice to Wilhelmina. Ambassador Donald Heath was so nice, he used to come up — they went to the American Community Church, we went to the Anglican Church. They'd come and pick Wilhelmina up and take her to church, and after the service people would come up to her and say, "Mrs. Bolling,

Library of Congress

would you like a ride home?" and she'd say, "Thank you very much but the Ambassador is taking me home." (laughter)Q: So she was nicely accepted...

DORSEY: Oh yes. We had to do an awful lot of entertaining there because of Steve's position. We had another maid part-time, and when we had parties we called on a sort of pool of men who were mostly drivers who spoke English and wanted extra income. They were all looking for Wilhelmina, they made all kinds of passes at her! Her social life was quite busy but she was always very particular — she would say, "Are you married?" Most of them were, a few were not, whom she'd go out with. One of them who liked her very much said, "Yes, I'm married," and she said, "Then I won't go out with you." "Why not?" he asked. "My wife doesn't work, I keep her very well, buy all her clothes, and it's none of her business who I go out with." Of course they were all Muslims. She said, "Well, if that's the way you feel, all right but I don't want to be upsetting your family household."

We had an awfully nice chauffeur-driver, Gataz (sp?) with a wife and two children. We used to go on lots of trips — to Baalbek, to Petra "the rose-red city half as old as time," down in the southernmost part of Jordan. He wasn't trying to do any — he was very happily married. There were several others who wanted to marry Wilhelmina, looking for a U.S. passport. She knew that. She and I were the same age, actually.

Q: That must have been a tremendous plus in your life...

DORSEY: It was fascinating, it really was. Khartoum was hard because the daily temperature averaged 90 degrees. On Christmas day, I'll never forget, it was 126 degrees. But it was very dry. A lot of new people were coming in whom I had to have for Christmas dinner. There I had three saffragis to take care of us, so I couldn't miss Wilhelmina that much. She used to write us the funniest letters.

Q: Her experiences with the Bowles?

Library of Congress

DORSEY: Yes. Especially with Mrs. Bowles. Wilhelmina was with them in between the Bowles's two tours in India. Wilhelmina wrote that Mrs. Bowles's favorite outfit was her sari, thong shoes and popup beads, and that she didn't care a bit about formalities; very simple. And he was awfully nice. But she was "stingy as she could be." Wilhelmina wasn't used to that. Mrs. Bowles would give a cocktail party for 30 or 40 people and serve only hors d'oeuvres. She'd have dinner parties too, for ten or 12 people, and Wilhelmina always brought in someone else to help her, because she was the cook. Afterwards Mrs. Bowles would say to her, "Now, MisWilhelmina, how much did that woman cost?" Wilhelmina would tell her — nothing like it is now, of course — and Mrs. Bowles would say, "That's too much, I can't afford that. Don't have her again." Wilhelmina shrugged her shoulders, didn't say anything. Come the next dinner party for ten or 12 she'd bring in another woman from across the street who cost less. Again Mrs. Bowles: "How much was that woman?" Wilhelmina said, "\$10" or something. "Too much I can't afford it. I don't want anybody else to come except you." And Wilhelmina replied, "Mrs. Bowles, I'm sorry but I cannot cook and serve a dinner for 12 people, I just can't do it." And Mrs. Bowles said, "You don't have to, you just put it on the table and we'll help ourselves." (laughter) So, Wilhelmina reported, "I put it on the table and they helped themselves." Q: (laughing) No matter who came to dinner?

DORSEY: Whoever came to dinner, they always helped themselves and didn't mind. There was something else she said that I can't remember but I do recall one of her remarks, "Well, I'll cross that bridge when my feet get wet!" (laughter)

Q: Did you save her letters?

DORSEY: I did for a long time. She's still living, down in Lynchburg, Virginia. A wonderful person.

Q: It sounds as though she went on these trips as an adventure too. After Khartoum she went to Genoa and Rome with you?

Library of Congress

DORSEY: Yes. We took her to Jerusalem I don't know how many times, which of course she loved. En route to Beirut we stopped off in England where great friends of ours were away, so they let us have their apartment. We took Wilhelmina sightseeing all around England on a bus from London, then at night she'd be at home with the children. She learned about the butcher and the greengrocer and pence and pounds — everything; she was wonderful. Before arriving in Beirut we were in Rome for a week and took her sightseeing with us. No one seemed to care that she was black.

Later on when we went back to Italy, all were fascinated with her. “Ecco la donna scura!” [here the dark woman] She took some lessons in Italian while we were in Genoa but you know, the Americans were very snooty, they complained about having Wilhelmina in their class.

Q: Because she was black, not because she wasn't learning the language.

DORSEY: So she had to stop. But she had been studying for six months before this happened. She couldn't make sentences but she understood a lot. In Genoa we had a butler and his wife and he used to take Wilhelmina up to the country every weekend, which was awfully nice. Although she didn't speak Italian she understood and got along beautifully.

Q: In our earlier years of course the children do take up quite a bit of our time when they're small. Later on how did you fill your time in, say, Rome and Genoa?

DORSEY: The children were in school then. Lyn went to an Italian school one semester, in Assisi, and took a course in Italy and tried to get credit toward college. But she had to take exams in French. They asked her how she knew about the French or how to analyze a sentence — I've forgotten what it was — she said, “I don't know, I just know that's the way you do it.” So they didn't pass her on it. She finally ended up while we were in Rome going

Library of Congress

to secretarial school in London. Charlotte was still in school in Lausanne, which was much closer to Genoa than it was to Rome. From there we used to go up quite often to see her.

Q: You were in Rome when Mrs. Luce was Ambassador?

DORSEY: No, afterwards. We were there with the Reinhardts. He was such a nice man, a darling.

Q: That's what everyone says. And his wife too.

DORSEY: And his wife, Solie; awfully nice. They used to say, "If you want the best food in Rome, just go to the Dorseys, don't come to us." (laughter) They had a lovely house, the Villa Taverna. He died about a year after Steve's death. They were in Rome a long time, more than seven years, especially for a career Ambassador. They had four children, two boys and two girls.

Q: I interviewed Julia Child, who told me exactly what you're saying, what lovely people the Reinhardts were. What was your husband's job in Rome?

DORSEY: He was supervising Consul General. We were supposed to be in Genoa for three years but were there only two. When the Reinhardts came up to spend a weekend with us, he was trying to cut Embassy staff, putting two people into one job. Mr. Reinhardt made Steve supervising Consul General and wanted him to come to Rome right away, curtailing our tour by one year.

We were in Rome for four years. But Steve loved Genoa because he was the boss there. We had to speak the language all the time, which was good for our Italian, and he loved that. Also, when he was in Rome Reinhardt made Steve in charge of all the American colony there, which was big. He didn't like that very much, we didn't see much of Italians.

Steve went to interview the Pope because Freddy Reinhardt didn't want to go and sent Steve. Two other Americans, Navy people, were there, at Castel Gandolfo, who'd come up

Library of Congress

from Naples or somewhere. One was Baptist, the other a Protestant of some kind. They all shook hands; Steve bowed but did not kiss the Pope's ring. Afterwards when the Pope discovered Steve could speak Italian so well, he kept him aside for about 15 minutes and they had a lovely talk. I have a picture of him with the Pope.

(Discussion about photographs and correspondence)

Q: I continue to be interested in your attitude, because any number of the "Wriston wives" whom we've talked to say they expected to live in Washington, they didn't expect to go overseas, there was an upheaval in their life that they didn't anticipate. None of that seems to have been a factor with you at all.

DORSEY: No, it wasn't, it wasn't.

Q: You must have blended right in with the Embassy.

DORSEY: Yes. Wonderful times. Khartoum, as I said, was difficult because it was so hot. Charlotte went to the Anglo-Sudanese school there, which was all right, but I remember one time when Loy Henderson was coming through. He'd been to South Africa and had a crew of seven or eight men. He called Steve and said they were coming through Khartoum and would not be there for lunch but would land, be there maybe an hour, then leave, around three p.m.

The morning of the day they were due, Steve had an appointment to see Gamal Abdel Nasser (sic, in Khartoum?) and knew nothing about Henderson's message. The Embassy called me about 9:30 a.m. and told me that Ambassador Henderson had changed his mind, they now wanted lunch on the ground and would arrive about 1 p.m. This was 1959-60 and there was only one hotel in Khartoum, on the Nile, and there just wasn't any place to take him. It was on a Friday and my cook, saffragi, stayed off. You can imagine — I really panicked. There would be members of the Embassy, seven or eight with Henderson, about 25 people. Here it was Friday, my cook was away, and I'm no cook.

Library of Congress

I sent our driver Hussein out and told him, "See if you can find the cook, I've got to have him with all these people coming." So he went out looking for him. About 11 o'clock he came back and said, "I found him, he was at the mosque and he said 'not to worry, Mrs. Dorsey, don't worry'." So he came back in turban and galabiyeh. Meanwhile I got out some frozen chickens we'd ordered from Beirut, because food in Khartoum wasn't all that easy to come by, and this and that. I had planned to play bridge with Mrs. Moose, our Ambassador's wife, and two other women. Of course we had to cancel that. The women all, literally, said, "We'll bake a cake!" And they made an angel food cake.

Furthermore, two Inspectors were there at the time. They came over to see the house when I was putting up bridge tables and other things, and asked, "How's everything going?" And I said, "I guess all right." The airport was only five minutes from our house. At 1:05 p.m. Ambassador Henderson arrived with his gang. Steve had heard about this by then and came home. Everybody was having drinks and a good time. We sat down and had lunch — the chickens and salad the cook had made, and it was all very nice. About 1:45, the men left to return to the plane. Ambassador Henderson came up to me and said, "Mrs. Dorsey, I know I've put you to a terrible inconvenience to do this, but I just want you to know this is the best meal we've had since we've been away!" So that was worth it. But I can't tell you how panicked I was — 25 people suddenly settling down on you with no warning. Henderson was a very sweet man.

Ambassador Moose was a very withdrawn man and he made Steve do everything because he didn't like to entertain. Of course he had to do a certain amount but he [did not] do any more than he could possibly help. He would say to Steve, "You do it."

Q: So that meant you do it.

Dorsey: But Steve was a great help. I remember Louis Armstrong came to play with his jazz band. We had a reception in the garden with about 200 people. We waited and waited and waited and Armstrong didn't come, finally Steve had to get up and announce that he

Library of Congress

wasn't coming that night because the woman who sang with them had died in Egypt while they were on the way down. Of course everybody was terribly disappointed. He came the next day.

Q: Did Ambassador Moose have a wife?

DORSEY: Oh yes, she was darling, just as sweet as she could be; very Southern, came from Washington, Kentucky. She called all her subordinates in the Embassy "Miss" — "Miss Carolyn," "Miss Margaret," and even her German shepherd dog was "Miss Dundirk." He was all right, just wasn't much of a mixer.

Q: In a way, that can be a rather nice experience, to have all of that responsibility as long as there's no friction between you and the Moores. But if he were retiring and didn't want to entertain, and she resented the fact that you were doing the entertaining, that would not have been so nice. But she just went along...

DORSEY: Oh yes. They had a very nice swimming pool and they always liked to have us over on Sunday; they'd have guests then.

Q: You must have had some lovely trips.

DORSEY: We did, including some safaris looking for animals and wildlife. We went down to the Uganda border.

Q: Did you take camping gear?

DORSEY: No, we went by the day, but there were certain houses — what do the British call them — where we could stay and we stayed in one of those lodges and went out from there. Those were fascinating trips, from 1959 to '61.

Q: We came into the Service in 1956, the year you went to Beirut. (Discussion of Fenzi tours, Guido Fenzi's work at Smithsonian with Curator of Numismatics, Mrs. Dorsey's theft

Library of Congress

of coins, silver and jewelry twelve years ago; Dorsey's basset hound, Julietta, lost and found — Pause) So many of the young Foreign Service wives work today. It's quite a different situation. What kind of volunteer work did you do abroad? How did you fill up your days?

DORSEY: I can't remember (laughter) but they all seemed to be fairly busy. I belonged to the American Women's Club. Other than that I can't recall. Had a lot of friends I used to see...

Q: I think we led more of a social life than today. Today so many wives are working in the Embassy or in the local economy.

DORSEY: Oh, I know. How do they feel about being paid to work for the Embassy?

Q: Many of them would like to be, and the AAFSW is putting forth a proposal now for compensation and more job opportunity. I'm of two minds about that. That's the reality of life today for young couples — two incomes and a career for the spouse — but I think it's made a difference in diplomatic life abroad.

DORSEY: Oh, I'm sure it has. Well, I can remember, in Khartoum, for instance, where we had to mix with so many blacks, there was a young couple in the Embassy who used to have people in for drinks. One time they were dancing, perhaps ten couples at most, and a Sudanese man was running his hand up and down his female partner's back. Her husband saw this but wouldn't do anything about it. She just had to put up with it, I guess, until finally suggesting they go get something to eat, or something. But she was miserable, and the man was somebody of importance.

Q: And her husband was reluctant to intervene for fear of an incident?

DORSEY: Absolutely.

Q: Well, I think we face that in our time abroad. I don't think that's an isolated case.

DORSEY: No, I don't think it is.

Library of Congress

Q: Well, it was an interesting life, I can't imagine doing anything else. How about your daughters?

DORSEY: Well, they seemed to enjoy it. They're both married now. (where they met their husbands, and their careers, medical problems, adopted children, the Gordons)

Q: I think we made some very close friends, living under circumstances like Khartoum, and Beirut. Tell me a bit about wartime Washington — that must have been exciting. Everybody says what a vital city it was.

DORSEY: I've sort of forgotten

Q: I guess there was a feeling of everyone pulling together, everyone having a very worthwhile cause.(Comparisons to Vietnam and the Gulf War, and outlook for Presidential elections, problems of the deficit and prevailing view that “no one can see a way out,” pollution, entitlement programs)

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Stephen Palmer Dorsey

Spouse's Position: Consul General

Spouse Entered FS:195Left Service: 1967 or 1968?You Entered Service:Same

Status: Widow of FSO Posts: 1956-59Beirut, Lebanon 1959-61Khartoum, Sudan
1961-62Washington, DC 1962-64Genoa, Italy 1964-68Rome, Italy

Place/Date of birth: Brookline, Massachusetts; 1910

Library of Congress

Maiden Name: Carolyn DuBois Cosby

Parents:

Mr. and Mrs. Frank C. Cosby, electrical engineer

Education: Miss May's in Boston; Debut in Brookline

Profession: None

Date/Place of Marriage: Brookline, Massachusetts; July 27, 1940

Children:

Carolyn D. Rathburn (b. 1943)

Charlotte D. Pasti (b. 1947)

End of interview